



Draft Revised Merced River Plan/SEIS

Wilderness Management

From its origin in the in the Sierra Nevada high country, approximately 53 of the total 81 miles of the Merced Wild and Scenic River corridor are located in wilderness areas of Yosemite National Park. The user capacity alternatives evaluated in Draft Revised Merced River Plan/SEIS all recognize and incorporate the very successful Wilderness Management Program that has been in place in Yosemite since the 1970s. This program has been a model for wilderness management throughout the United States because it provides for maximum visitor freedom while appropriately protecting wilderness values and park resources. Key components of the program include use limits, monitoring, and education. The Wilderness Trailhead Quota System, education, and monitoring programs such as the Wilderness Impacts Monitoring System and Yosemite Wilderness sociological study ensure that the level of use in the backcountry neither degrades the natural and cultural resources nor detracts from a unique wilderness experience.



Wilderness Management Program

The **Wilderness Trailhead Quota System** was established in the 1970s to protect wilderness areas within Yosemite National Park. This system assigns a daily quota for each wilderness trailhead in the park. The quotas are based on scientific studies that evaluated ecological condition and historic use patterns. Controlling use at the trailhead allows for maximum visitor freedom—considered a cornerstones of the wilderness experience—while allowing the park to limit or disperse use as appropriate. Visitor experience also plays an important role in managing numbers. In 2002, a major **sociological study**, *“Integrating Social, Ecological, and Managerial Indicator of Quality into Carrying Capacity Decision Making in Yosemite National Park Wilderness”* was completed, assessing the effectiveness of the quotas. The study also provided managers with other information about encounter levels and visitor perception of other management issues. The Wilderness Trailhead Quota System allows for a total of 1,280 overnight visitors to enter the wilderness each day. Day use is not currently limited or controlled.

Wilderness Education plays a critical part in protecting park resources once visitors enter the wilderness. Wilderness permits, used to implement the trailhead quota system, allow park staff to contact all overnight visitors and educate them about their responsibilities for protecting Yosemite’s wilderness. Visitor impacts are also managed by designated campsite requirements in some heavily used areas such as Little Yosemite Valley or adjacent to the High Sierra Camps.

Wilderness Monitoring is an integral part of Yosemite’s wilderness management program. Visitor use patterns have been tracked since 1975 from wilderness permits and field reports by rangers. Monitoring of campsite and trail impacts also began in the 1970s. A program now called the Wilderness Impacts Monitoring System (WIMS) monitors and evaluates campsite conditions in the wilderness to ensure that the trailhead quotas and wilderness

education about proper backcountry care are adequately protecting wilderness values. Using WIMS, visitor satisfaction information, patrol data, and a variety of other studies, the National Park Service conducts wilderness-wide inventory and monitoring. Data gathered from these studies are used to determine when, where, and why significant change occurs, to adjust management practices as appropriate to eliminate unacceptable impacts, and to provide a system for tracking those changes.

What effect will the Revised Merced River Plan have on wilderness management?

The existing Wilderness Management Program has been very successful in allowing for public access to wilderness experiences, while maintaining and protecting wilderness values. The Trailhead Quota System, WIMS, visitor education, and other management practices will continue to be implemented under the Revised Merced River Plan but could be affected by implementation of the proposed Visitor Experience and Resource Protection (VERP) user capacity program as applied to the river corridor.

All of the proposed action alternatives in the Draft Revised Merced River Plan/SEIS include implementation of a VERP program that establishes indicators and standards, monitors those indicators, and requires management action to ensure that adopted standards are maintained within the river corridor. Implementation of VERP will augment the existing Wilderness Management Program by adding indicators to be monitored, including one that addresses day use. In the event that a standard is not being met, a range of management actions could be taken. Management could reduce certain trailhead quotas, or could reduce or restrict certain types of uses in wilderness areas. The action taken will depend upon the specific circumstances regarding the indicator affected.

In addition to the VERP program, the proposed action alternatives also implement other interim or long-term limits in the river corridor. Under Alternative 2, there are interim facility limits that would restrict any additional facilities from being constructed in the wilderness until the VERP program is fully implemented and the interim facility limits are lifted. Under Alternative 3, the limits for wilderness segments are set at the level of the existing trailhead quotas and so would not result in any change from current management policies in most areas. Alternative 3 does include a limit on day hikers heading to Half Dome. The area between Yosemite Valley and Half Dome gets the most day use of any wilderness or backcountry zone within the Merced River corridor. Therefore, this alternative would limit day use of this area to the existing peak level. Under Alternative 4, wilderness management zones would continue to be managed at the levels existing under the Wilderness Trailhead Quota System. The issue of wilderness day use management and facilities will also be addressed in the upcoming *Wilderness Management Plan*.

Overall, the VERP user capacity program, along with other limits proposed under the action alternatives, is expected to complement the visitor experience in wilderness areas of Yosemite National Park by building on the success of the existing Wilderness Management Program. Implementation of the Revised Merced River Plan would supplement wilderness monitoring with additional information from the VERP standards and indicators, and could result in establishment of day use limits between Yosemite Valley and Half Dome.